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# SANITY IN FICTION.

BY HAMLIN GARLAND.

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IN no department of American literature have the dictates of the democratic masses been more absolute than in our fiction. Seventy years ago, there were but a handful of novels in all America. To-day there are millions. We not only consume all that our own busy writers produce, but devour hundreds of others imported from the Old World.

This enormous multiplication of a form of literature once tabooed, is not a matter of chance, a mere surface indication; its implications go deep. In studying recent fiction, the investigator is met by a number of serious questions. Is it about to absorb all other forms of literature? Is it to continue to amuse merely, or is it to become the chief means of instructing our people? Is it to be superseded by some form of drama? And, above all, is it to follow the lead of the newspaper, growing each day more ephemeral, dealing only with the exceptional, the morbid, the criminal?

It is of no avail to assail the proprietor of a newspaper, the manager of a theatre or the publisher of books who responds to the demand for sensationalism; in fact, I even doubt the efficacy of assailing "the public." But a discussion of the subject, a presentation of aims and ideals which are neither sensational nor ephemeral, may be of value to the reader, and may, possibly, influence the young writer, who has been dazzled and perhaps a bit bewildered by the sublimation of the shilling shocker and its amazing vogue.

Herr Nordau, who sins deplorably against his own laws, has nevertheless arrayed so well the charges against the prevalent forms of fiction that I cannot do better than quote him:

"The literature of fiction is an enormous collection of tales of disease. Novels and plays in the highest forms have the same propensity

as the newspapers; they devote themselves to the exceptions and exaggerations. . . . The ordinary peaceful crowds of human beings who are neither specially good nor specially bad, who support themselves honestly and leave a will when they die, and upon whose busy life the sun shines all over the broad earth, these are not the human beings whom fiction portrays. Why is it that all fiction, the naturalistic as well as the rest, devotes itself exclusively to the portrayal of morbid or exceptional cases?"

The chief reason is in the quality of the reader. The democrat of our day is on the lookout for sensations. The circumstances under which he lives ordinarily are so familiar or so distasteful that he fails to perceive their value, their interest. It is the blue distance which enchants and allures. He demands a fiction of the unusual, the far-off, the grandiose, something outside his own life, something to thrill, to excite. This is the general statement, but there are modifications. It is not necessary in all cases that the circumstances and incidents described be unfamiliar, and strange; it is only necessary that they present a contrast, that they arouse emotion. The differences which have sprung up in the social life of the United States are now so broad, so deep, that the keenest delight often arises from the presentation of the scenes of a previous life. The old homestead is now sweetened and made fragrant by contrast with the tumult of our great cities, and yet even in this case the poetry springs from distance. The near at hand remains squalid and prosaic.

There is a still more suggestive fact connected with this thought. It is not always necessary that the scene or people be associated with the past life of the reader, nor that it be strange (though that is true and opens a vast field for the production of the modern novel); for, through the power of a really great writer, the reader may, in a large degree, live the life depicted no matter how remote. In this way, we may acquire the most intimate knowledge of the real life of the Russian peasant, or understand the yeomen in Yorkshire, and, more important still, we may realize the life of our own widely separated States.

But all these are but limitations of certain types of novels; there is a still higher work for the writer, which Whitman calls "teaching the average man the glory of his daily walk and trade," and this Mr. Howells, the first of our realists, has been able to do. He has interested his readers from the start in scenes and characters near at hand. Detaching individuals from the multi-

tudes who pass us unnoticed or without significance, he has by some magic been able to transform them, making them typical and absorbing. They were common before, seen (if at all) at an indifferent angle, they are *uncommon* when transferred to his books, and deeply significant. They were only "average facts" on the street; but in this new light, transformed by the wonderful alchemy of his art and his gracious personality, they have become humorous, beautiful, far-reaching. They are important because they *are* average, standing for vast numbers of others closely related.

Mr. Howells, more than any other of our writers, has demonstrated that a public exists for a sane and wholesome novel. In his development can be traced the broadening scope of our literature, and, above all, its deepening humanity—its altruism. But it still remains true that almost all the fiction of America, and indeed of the world, treats of the morbid, the diseased, rather than the healthy, and has been, for the most part, an exotic, formed upon the reigning models of the Old World and absolutely foreign to our average peaceful life.

Mr. Howells's development has been steady and consistent. "Their Wedding Journey" and "A Chance Acquaintance" were hardly more than sketches of travel; but each succeeding book broadened in scope, till, in "The Undiscovered Country," he reached the full stature of a novelist. This beautiful story was easily the finest novel of New England life of its time; but, with the publication of "A Modern Instance," Mr. Howells took his place among the wisest and best of the world's novelists. "Silas Lapham" and "Lemuel Barker" followed, dealing as no other novels had dealt with American social life, and Lowell's predictions concerning "that young man Howells" were fulfilled. From that day to this, he has remained a master spirit in our literature, and a study of his methods of appeal and the success he has had, becomes of prime importance in considering the trend of our fiction. He stands for sound workmanship and for the permanent rather than for the ephemeral. He is a man of unswerving ideals, and remains unmoved by the rush along cheap and easy routes to success.

The American public, speaking generally again, was by no construction ready to receive the new fiction of Mr. Howells, but he found sympathizers nevertheless. In every town, small groups of

thoughtful readers welcomed "The Undiscovered Country" and "Silas Lapham," recognizing in them harbingers of greater sanity and wider sympathy in the novel, and around him rapidly rose a group of younger men and women who believed in his theories and found his methods congenial. It would be unjust to call them imitators. It is truer to say that, like the group surrounding Cooper, they found their master to their mind.

As we enter the pages of "A Modern Instance" and "A Woman's Reason," we find ourselves in the modern America, dealing with probable characters in their every-day lives. The women do not lament in blank verse, neither do the men woo in oratorical prose. They are very like people we have known, and the problems they face are as real as those which confront us. As some one has said: "You can go and ring the door-bell where they live." Everything improbable is left out. All distempered moralizing and all impertinent comment are cut away. Whatever is distinctive, particular, of the time and place is preserved. Save in the best of Henry James, no such rigidly artistic restraint in fiction has appeared in America.

If we look a little more closely at this modern novel, represented by "A Modern Instance," we discover that the *probable* is made, throughout, the basis of art. Mr. Howells has departed as widely from old ideals as our modern landscape painters, who no longer concern themselves with hypothetical mountains and symmetrically arranged lights and shades, but paint nature as they see it, putting the *effect* upon the canvas, aiming at no expressed moral. Mr. Howells, in much the same fashion, aims to present life as it appears to him, leaving effect to take care of itself. He never coddles his reader—sometimes I wish he did, so greatly is he misapprehended by people otherwise intelligent.

The conventional novel, for example, has a great liking for types. One man becomes the incarnation of all vice, another embodies all virtue. The heroine is as beautiful as an angel (and as insipid), while her rival has raven locks and a heart of hate. The villain appears in the first chapter crying "S'death!" but the hero always triumphs in the last chapter, and the heroine enters upon a life of uninterrupted and dreadfully monotonous bliss. This is the outline of some millions of the novels read in America, and some thousands that are written here, weak reflections of the tales of a childish age.

Everybody knows that this sort of story is contrary to real life; and that villains of this sort could not keep out of the hands of the police long enough to lay the train of their villainy, much less fire it, and the angelic characters are quite as illogical and tiresome, and yet they multiply, because to the toiler real life has no artistic value. He desires the fantastic, the feudal, the unreal. To such a reader Mr. Howells does not attempt to appeal. He is an artist, not a stump-speaker.

Over against the conventional romance the modern novelist sets his view. Men and women are mixtures of good and evil impulses. No one becomes good or bad all at once; nor do most men love evil for its own sake. Bartly Hubbard did not become depraved and lost to honor at the end of a paragraph, but by degrees, by almost insensible gradations. The villain of the romance is a scarecrow, a relic of the devil in the "Morality Play" of the Middle Ages. Bartly Hubbard and Silas Lapham are men of defective training and bad blood. Like most of us, they have some enemy within the walls who unbars the gates and flings them wide for the entrance of ruin. Jeff Durgin is both admirable and disgusting because of his perfectly human traits.

These are but examples, however, of the subsidiary parts of Mr. Howells's work. It is his avowed design to treat of the average, the commonplace, to celebrate the men and women of his day in America. He aims at being true to his time and place. He is a student of life here and now, and he advocates freedom from masters. His characters are healthy rather than diseased people. He has taught his readers to recognize in some measure at least the significance of the physiologic as over against the pathologic.

Like Whitman, he has no need of themes of feudalism, and in his quiet fashion he is quite as revolutionary. Furthermore, his realism is not the naturalism of Zola. Zola was a writer of the first class, but he was not a realist as Mr. Howells uses the term, for the reason that he treated, not of the average, but of the abnormally developed, the criminal. He dealt too largely with phenomenal cases, with the animal traits of men. This is truth of a certain sort, but it has no kinship with the realism of Howells, and is very far from the ideal of Whitman. Decorum, decency and humor are the characteristics of the average American as Whitman observed him, and these qualities are in every line written by the author of "Silas Lapham."

The majority of men are not libertines or thieves, nor the majority of women conscienceless—even in Paris. In his war upon the romantic school, with their superhuman and ideal characters, Zola swept to the opposite pole. He proceeded upon the supposition that the public could not be interested in average personalities and in decent lives. As a result millions read his books for their brutal plainness of speech, rather than for their tragic breadth and bitter comment.

Not till Howells came did any considerable public in America appreciate the regular, the average, the near at hand. In a very high sense he is "the evangel of the commonplace."

It must be inserted at this point that many of our young novelists soon feel Zola's distrust, and fail in their attempt to depict in the realistic manner the life of some special locality, because of their fear of being dull. Whitman once complained to me that the local novel (which I was advocating) was too sensational, too bizarre. The cowboy novel was to him a sort of delirium-tremens novel, because it flowed with liquor and was hazy with the smoke of gunpowder. He asked for a literature of the decent and decorous men of the West. He said, in substance:

"Writers of this type comb together the unusual happenings of thirty years, in order to fill their books with odd or mysterious or picturesque characters. If they see in the paper a most singular account of a miser, or of a man living a double life, or of a man falling dead of heart-disease in a court-room, or of a horrible and mysterious murder, they clip it 'to work into' their novels. 'Are these not real facts?' they say. 'Do they not belong in a realistic study of an American town?' After being sufficiently spiced in this manner, stuffed with such sugar-plums, these novels are sent out as accurate studies of life in Pueblo or Omaha, when, as a matter of fact, they are as false to life as a city newspaper which ignores the law-abiding and quiet citizens, and deals only with the criminal, the abnormal."

I was obliged to admit that there was much truth in his statement. The average American town seldom does enjoy a band of stage robbers as a part of its outfit. All banks do *not* break, nor do all cashiers leave suddenly for Canada. Neither is the average Ohio town populated with burglars and vagrants with mysterious histories, villains who do nothing but spin plots to carry off maidens from their own true loves, nor with excessively hand-

some young heroes who have nothing to do but make love or follow up the villain and imbrue the ground with his life-blood. The moment the structure of these stories is set forth in plain words, it is seen how false, how cheap, they are.

Mr. Howells does not seek for the exceptional. He aims throughout to be true to his horizon and to the locality which he sets out to depict. He is as sane as Whitman, and is possessed of a distinctive humor which the gray old seer lacked. His books are as sunny and normal as those of Poe and Hawthorne are gloomy and fantastic. He takes care to have no more exceptionally good or bad or singular characters than there would be in any social group of citizens similarly situated. And more than this, the whole development of his story is logical. He seeks to verify at each point the positions in which the characters place themselves. He avoids producing colorless types, and is ever calm and observant, being as critical of his heroine as of his villain.

His characters are individuals, not because of abnormal exteriors, but because the author has the sympathetic insight and the quality of expression which enable him to make the most commonplace character an object of art. He discards the "deep and thrilling plot" as unnecessary to his books. His charm is not dependent upon suspense but upon analysis.

Wild-eyed lovers, lunatics and assassins have no place in his stories. He embodies the tranquil, the sunny, the domestic, which are, after all, still the distinctive features of our society.

Few of us commit murder or adultery; we pride ourselves on being pretty decent fellows on the whole. We do not make love in the hysterical fashion of the romance, nor die of a rejection, as certain novelists would have us believe men do. Ungovernable passions visit us but seldom, if at all; and, besides, the deep passions are quiet. Those who rage are soon exhausted.

Men are regular at their meals, even when their wives or children die. The darkly tragic, the murderous, are not the common sort by any means; they were not so even in the past. On the contrary the major part of mankind have lived and died quietly. Love, moreover, does not make up as much of life as romance implies. Most of us are occupied with business or politics by far the larger number of our days, and are lovers only part of the time, though courtship certainly continues to be the sweetest and most sacred experience of every man's life.



If these things are true, and if it is also true that fiction and the drama for the last century have rung the changes on all the abnormal, the hideous, the lascivious, the lunatic and the volcanic in human life, is it not the part of a sane and cultured novelist to take up new themes, dealing with "mental *physiology* instead of mental *pathology*, concerning himself with healthy rather than with diseased persons"? Is it not well to ignore rather than to perpetuate the fiction founded upon other conditions and societies, and so unwholesome to our American youth? Shall we not have a drama and fiction true to modern America?

It is not true that a sane novel lacks readers. Mr. Howells is not neglected. He lives very well and his high position in American letters is no longer in question, and yet he has never swerved in his allegiance to his ideal of what our literature should be. He has not conformed to this or that change in literary fashions, but has gone on steadily in his own way serene and unangered. He is willing to admit that sensation draws a larger audience and pays a larger dividend. But a great and enduring literature cannot be founded in this way. Suppose every writer in America were to turn next year to writing love romances of mediæval France; what an absurd spectacle we would present to the world!

Another and very important feature of Mr. Howells's art is his humorous and analytical study of women and his choice of a great variety of types. This is a most distinctive distinction. Ours is the golden age of women. Our literature not only deals with women—it is addressed to them.

Mr. Howells does not derive his knowledge of the feminine from romantic sources. He is an observer; and what is still more unusual, he is humorously observant even of his heroines!

To quote Nordau again:

"Most of us have obtained our ideas of woman from poetry and fiction; and the poets, in their portrayal of womankind, have not been impelled by an honest spirit of observation, but by an unconscious spirit of gallantry. . . . In our polite literature, woman is not a sober zoological description, but the ideal of some impassioned male imagination. The writer is not delineating, but wooing. When he speaks of woman, he is not an impartial observer but instinctively a suitor for her favor."

Especially is this true of the "heroine," who is usually the most colorless and conventional figure in the poem or the novel, while the old or low-class women are always much more indi-

vidual and lifelike. This was true of Scott, for example, and Dickens, and especially of Cooper—a weakness in which can be traced survivals of the heroic age when fiction had to do with men, chieftains at that; children, women and the thrall entering only in the most incidental way.

During the Middle Ages, the maiden appeared and took a place beside the chief. She represented the ideal woman of the time, as the knight did the ideal man of the time. These love-lorn beings were always young and ravishingly beautiful, and exactly alike (barring some slight, altogether immaterial, differences in “orbs” and “tresses”)—they all had “trembling white bosoms,” “tender limbs” and “silvery voices”; just as all seasons were spring, and all nights moon-lit and possessing gentle zephyrs and grieving nightingales. They no more represented the women of their day than a circle and three dots represent an individual face, and yet they persist in modified form to this day in certain types of “Lady May” romances.

Manifestly, it would be ridiculous for Mr. Howells to thrust into the reality of Silas Lapham’s household, or any of the households which he depicts, the last characterless modification of the beautiful maiden of romance, the vague figure which has floated through every poem and novel for a thousand years. Such wraiths could not exist for a moment on the deck of the “Aroos-took” or in the dining-room of “The Lion’s Head Inn.”

This is of more importance than will at once appear, for the influence of fiction upon feminine character is very great. Girls get their knowledge of the world in large measure from novels, and it is of the utmost importance that their ideas of courtship should be sane and wholesome at least. The women in America read in far greater proportion than the women of other lands, and they read more fiction than the American man; and while their influence on fiction is admitted, fiction unquestionably has a corresponding effect upon them. The humorous exposition of feminine as well as male excesses and follies is likely to have a beneficent influence on the nation’s life, by giving comparative ideas of life and love to “the mothers of men.”

They certainly receive the most painstaking consideration from both Mr. Howells and Mr. James, many of whose books are most elaborate and serious studies of women, from the girl of nine to the grandmother of ninety, not confined, as were the old novelists,

to those of a marriageable age and of extraordinary beauty. In "The Bostonians," for example, there is the most careful setting forth of a pale, thin, nervous spinster, with "absolutely no figure at all;" and in Mr. Howells's novels physical beauty is seldom insisted upon. The charm of all his women chiefly lies in their unexpected candor, their subtle insight and their abounding and sympathetic understanding of others.

We discover more than variety in character in his novels. In depicting the young and lovely heroine he uses the same self-restraint and employs the same analytic method with which he delineates aged or the "low-class" women. He is not wooing, he is defining. This method does not secure great emotional tension, but it is fraught with great good to the reader. In such a bracing air morbid passions and foolish fancies wither and die.

Here the American realist takes issue with Zola. It is not necessary to deal with a wanton in order to make a realistic study of a woman; witness George Eliot's "Sister Pullet," Howells's "Mrs Lapham" and the lonely spinsters in Miss Wilkins's stories. As Veron said, "we care no longer for gods and heroes, we care for men;" so we may say, we care no longer for goddesses and heroines, we care for women, real, individual, modern women.

One of the most common and one of the most mistaken of all criticism upon the work of Mr. Howells is that which persists in asserting that his women are all alike and without dignity or charm. This view is curiously at variance with the facts. The critic has but to think of "The Lady of the Aroostook," Egeria, Marcia Gaylord, Irene Lapham, Dr. Breen, Olive Halleck, 'Stira Dudley, the Dreyfus girls, Miss Vance, Mrs. Durgin and Mrs. March, to perceive how mistaken he is. This criticism is made, I fear, by those who have read only Mr. Howells's farces.

He does not rhapsodize over his heroines, it is true; he is not a passionate wooer of their favors; but he is always kind, always sweet and manly in his treatment of them. His humor is corrective; it is never bitter. He is interested in all silent heroisms. War and crime, the abnormal, the furious, are left out of his books. He is interested not in what men and women do in times of fire and murder and other exceptional circumstances, but in their quiet sacrifices, their every-day lives, in their calm moments. His love-stories are pure and sane and self-contained; the erotic maniac is not to be found in the very best of his volumes.

All these characteristics give him great distinction over the mob of those who put their trust in incident and in the two grand insanities, lust and war. He appeals to intellect, not to emotion; and, as thought is higher and rarer than brute passion, his audience is narrowed by his exclusion of themes which excite and harrow the nerves. To many readers he is dull and slow. His exquisite English, his rare and delicate humor, his altruism, have all escaped them. He is never "spicy," never panders to a seared palate. Many of his warm personal friends do not like his books, but this does not argue that the books lack art and humor and true feeling; often it means that the author is fresher in perception than his neighbor, sweeter in his sympathies. I am willing to confess, even at the end of this paragraph of praise, that I cannot always follow him; but this is because my life is so much more active, not to say unreflective, than his. He sits above the tumult and his heart is sound and sweet.

There remains a further consideration concerning the question of realism. Mr. Howells in his use of the term does not mean, as many suppose, the reproduction on canvas or in the novel of the scene or character precisely as would be done by photograph. On the contrary, the realist paints the scene as it *appears to him*, and it is this subtle interposition of his personality which makes the painting a work of art, absolute realism being as impossible as it is undesirable.

"There can be no art without selection," and in this selection, in the arrangement of lines and colors, in the "distribution of values," the artist appears. No matter how he may strive for absolute realism, he always adds something from himself. This quality is manifested first in the choice of subject, next in the arrangement of parts, by the importance given to some and withheld from others—unconsciously it may be.

In the choice of subjects it has been shown that Mr. Howells is democratic, modern. More than this, he is sympathetic, because he "knows how it is himself." He sympathizes with the common people not because it is a duty, but because he feels he is one of them. This gives him full license to be humorous, with the same gentle satire one uses when rebuking a friend. He is humorously tender, as Whitman was gravely and fervently tender. This tension, so sane and sweet, is wellnigh unparalleled, and it measures all his angles of vision. He is not above his subjects

but among them, and when he treats of Lemuel Barker and Manda Grier he enters their horizon and pleads their cause; he never leaves out their humanity, never depicts them as grotesque or insipid, for they are not so in his eyes. He is never bitter, even when exposing folly; never despairing, notwithstanding he knows so much of the squalor of life.

It is evident that, as all this appears in his writing, he cannot be a mere photographer. He is, indeed, a very great way from giving the average point of view. His art is most discriminating, and his style is of rare beauty and simplicity, and of remarkable pictorial power.

But, some one says, he goes into so many useless particularities. Possibly; but the question is, *are* they useless particulars? If they are, then they are wrong and the art is bad art. But this is the age of the particular and the distinctive, the farthest remove from the literature of the clan and the tribe. In his rebound from the vague and the general in feudal literature, the democratic novelist is apt to go too far in this direction. I sometimes feel this fault in Mr. Howells, especially in his serials—in book form it is less noticeable.

The test is, Do the details help to give individuality and vitality to the picture?

It is not in the scope of this writing to enter farther into detailed study of this great writer. When his volumes are finally bound together, they will present a study thus far unequalled by any delineator of American society. In such a final view it is possible that the apparent lack of large aim, which is now the most pertinent criticism of his stories, will have less cogency. When his plan is all under the eye, it may appear that the present is to be represented, not as the age of colossal personalities, but of high average personality. Suppose Mr. Howells to write ten books of the style and breadth of "Silas Lapham," "Lemuel Barker," "A Modern Instance," "A Hazard of New Fortunes" and "The Kentons." Then imagine yourself looking back upon them at the distance of half a century, from the year 1950—and perhaps much of that which now seems redundant will have taken on striking value.

Perhaps these familiar little touches, these insertions of what people actually do and say, will be read with the most absorbing interest, while large figures like Lapham, Hælleck, Hubbard, Dry-

fus, will be great because they are representative of a special class of our people, at the same time that their individuality is predominant. They will stand out vividly against a background of lesser figures coming and going, while around them, like the roar of a great city, the buzzing of vast crowds will be heard.

I do not mean to claim for Mr. Howells any superhuman genius; his humanity is his strong point. I do not wish to be understood as saying that he is the greatest novelist of the age, for all are not agreed as to what constitutes a great novelist; nor that he has reached the further wall of the evolution of his art. But I am willing to be held responsible for this judgment: He is the most American, the most sympathetic, the truest writer in American fiction.

He expresses his age and is inextricably bound up in it. He can never be separated from the air and thought of the present half-century. See what he has done. Reread the delicious "Lady of the Aroostook," the exquisite "Undiscovered Country," the broad and vivid novel, "A Modern Instance." Recall the pathetic and yet humorous account of Lemuel Barker, the pitiless yet sympathetic study of Silas Lapham. See how he has dealt with a great theme in "A Hazard of New Fortunes," and again in "The Quality of Mercy." By putting his study upon conditions and scenes having only adult associations, and especially by studying what goes on around him every day, Mr. Howells has given us accurate and broadly varied views of nearly every phase of life which has touched him closely. He has not sought adventure; his themes come as naturally as his words. To some this may seem prosaic and vulgar, but to others it appears to be a great and shining work. His influence has been wholly good.

It is to me a most notable fact, that this man has risen to be our chief literary man, on the strength of some ten or twelve novels wherein his critics may vainly search for a single murder, conflagration, abduction, divorce or pistol-shot. We can safely challenge the world to produce his equal in sanity, sympathy and humorous insight.

HAMLIN GARLAND.